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ABSTRACT

In the past, educators have been reluctant to deal openly with the issue of school violence. This paper examines feedback from workshops on bullying and refers to the results of a survey of school psychologists regarding school violence. It is argued that the causes of violence at school are multifaceted and interactive. Bullying is a world-wide problem and many school psychologists report that they are poorly prepared to respond to such violence. Staff responses to bullying depend on a variety of factors, such as their own experiences, beliefs, and discipline styles. Schools lacking preventative strategies often favor traditional punitive approaches. Given the prevalence of bullying violence in schools and its negative effects on the well-being of students, programs need to be instituted so that all schools can readily access expertise, resources, and training. School psychologists have a range of specialist skills to assist schools in this endeavor, but due to a lack of training, they have been reluctant to take the lead in this area. A cascade system of developing expertise across schools is needed in order to make systems manageable. All members of the school community need the knowledge and skills to prevent school violence. (Contains 15 references.) (RJM)

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Battler, Helper or Strategist ... School Psychologists' Responses to Bullying and Violence in Schools

Griffiths, Coosje -- Education Department of Western Australia

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BATTLER, HELPER OR STRATEGIST ... SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS' RESPONSES TO BULLYING AND VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS.

Griffiths, Coosje - Education Department of Western Australia

Introduction

It is generally accepted that schools in Australia are relatively free of violence. Comparisons for instance with American schools suggest that Australia is in a strong position to maintain a relatively safe learning environment, where violence is kept isolated and to a minimum.

Western Australia in particular is regarded as offering a relaxed life style with minimal violence. However, in the past three years there has been increasing media attention to incidents in both independent and state schools. Concerns about school bullying and violence have also been expressed by bodies such as the Western Australian Council of State School Organisations and the State School Teacher's Union. Parents have also resorted to the use of the criminal justice system to deal with school-related violence in the form of restraining orders and criminal charges. These factors have raised public awareness to the fact that Western Australian schools are not immune to problems of violence and bullying and that they reflect national and international trends.

In the past, there has been a reluctance by educators to gather information or to deal openly with the issue of school violence by developing whole school strategies. Concerns that these strategies may reflect poorly on the school's reputation combined with a lack of available alternative frameworks inhibited schools in initiating strategies.

As an issue of growing community concern, it is timely for Australian schools to take the problem seriously before it reaches the proportions evident in other countries. The unique skills of school psychologists are needed in order to help schools to become aware of emerging problems, and provide effective preventative and intervention procedures so that schools can provide safer learning environments.

This paper is based on feedback from numerous workshops on bullying run by the author with students, staff, parents, school psychologists and community groups and research and collaboration with national and international authorities in the field. The paper refers to the results of a survey of school psychologist conducted by Griffiths and Wright-Atkinson in 1994, based on a similar survey developed by Furlong et. al.(1994) and collated by Wright-Atkinson (1995).

Defining bullying and violence

The term 'violence' used in this paper is based on the definition provided by the Australian Education Union, 1994 as follows "Violence in schools is present in any situation where a member of the school community (teacher, student, other education worker, parent, or visitor) is intimidated, abused, threatened, or assaulted or their property deliberately damaged by another member of that community or the public in circumstances arising out of their activities ain a school." The definition also involves the element of deliberate intent or an "unjust use of force or power"(Morrison et. al., 1994, p 241).

The term 'bullying' in this paper will be defined as "the repeated and unprovoked negative behaviour (both physical and non-physical) directed by more powerful students or groups of students against less powerful students" (cited in HRSCEET, 1994, p12).

The main difference between bullying and vic'ence is that bullying is an on-going event which can be social, physical, psychological or verbal. An act of violence can be an incident which does not always involve an on-going relationship. It can also be perpetrated by a victim of bullying as an attempt to resolve on-going bullying problems.

Causes

The causes of violence at school are multifaceted and interactive. They are influenced by parenting practices, socio-economic factors, temperamental differences, school factors, peer culture, and societal reinforcement of violence models such as in the media and sport.

Research generally agrees that parenting practices are amongst the most influential factors that determine children's future aggressive behaviour at school The school environment is also influential on the amount of violence that occurs in a school depending on the school ethos, policies, curriculum and pastoral care practices (Elliott, 1994; National Committee on Violence, 1990; Rutter et.al., 1979).

Incidence

Violence in schools has been the topic of international research and is considered a worldwide problem.

they had them in their schools, which is a high rate compared to the findings in the USA (Furlong et.al., 1994; Wright-Atkinson, 1995).

Current School Psychologists' Responses To School Bullying/ Violence

The survey of Western Australian psychologists reveals that the majority of respondents (81.1%) reported that they were not well prepared or only partly prepared to respond to school violence as it occurs at their schools. Only 18.3% felt well prepared and only one individual (.6%) reported that he was totally prepared to address violence at school (refer to table 2).

Responses to the question of level of 'preparedness' indicated that 27.5% of the respondents felt they weren't prepared because of lack of training or experience and those who felt partly prepared (53.6%), attributed their response to participation in training programs and reading in the area. Respondents who believed they were well prepared (18.3%) reported they were adequately trained and they possessed knowledge of intervention strategies. There were no correlations between the level of preparedness and gender, location (rural or city), or educational levels (pre-primary, primary, high school, education support facilities). Only a moderate correlation was found between years of service as a school psychologist age of respondents and perceived level of preparedness.

School psychologists reported that of the most effective strategies currently being employed at their school to address school violence, school bullying policies were most prevalent (45.6%) and the managing student behaviour policy was the next most favoured (26.3%).Refer to table 3.

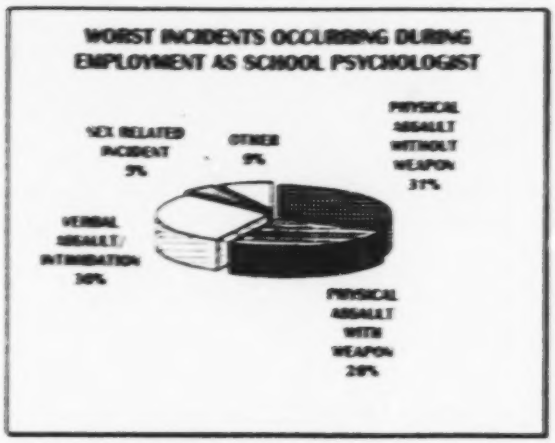
WORST INCIDENTS OCCURRING DURING EMPLOYMENT AS SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST
SEX RELATED INCIDENT 5%
OTHER 9%
PHYSICAL ASSAULT WITHOUT WEAPON 31%
VERBAL ASSAULT/ INTIMIDATION 26%
PHYSICAL ASSAULT WITH WEAPON 29%

Table 1: Worst incidents of school violence during employment as a school psychologist, WA 1994.

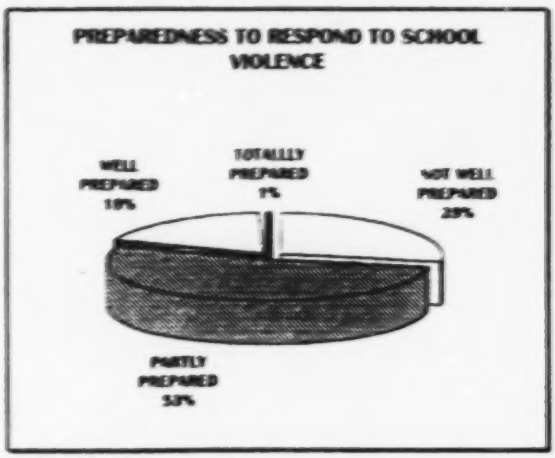

Table 2: How well prepared school psychologists felt to address school violence, WA 1994.

Specialised Training for School Psychologists

A large proportion of school psychologists (71.3%) reported that they hadn't received any special training for addressing violence.

Of those respondents who reported receiving special training, 78.9 % had attended bullying workshops, 13.2 % had received critical incidence training, and 7.9 % had been involved in conflict resolution training. Of those who responded 86.8% of school psychologists found the training to be useful to very useful, whilst 13.2% found the training to be of little or no use. This indicates that those who participated in special training benefited from it suggesting that it is worthwhile to train school psychologists in the area of violence prevention/intervention. The majority of respondents (90.4%), expressed a need for special training. Of these, only 71.6% wanted to receive training themselves. This implies that a small group of school psychologists who only feel partly or not well prepared do not seek to improve their skills in addressing school violence.

However, when asked to relate special training suggestions, only two thirds of school psychologists offered a range of strategies, suggesting a lack of knowledge of violence prevention/intervention programs and/or that it is not the school psychologist's role.

An open-ended question on special training suggestions, resulted in 25% of respondents proposing whole school approaches, 18.1% prevention/intervention/post-intervention approaches, 12.1% bullying policies and 11.1% training teachers to manage violent situations. Special training suggestions are listed in table 4.

School Psychologists' Roles In Assisting Schools

The responses of staff to bullying depend on a variety of factors including: their own experiences, beliefs and discipline style, the modelling behaviour of other significant staff, and school policies and practices.

Schools which have done little or no training in developing strategies, often favour traditional punitive approaches for dealing with bullying incidents as they arise.

The approach to incidents tends to be of an adversarial or 'judge and jury' nature. An incident is reported, the staff member makes a judgement and then metes out the punishment or consequences. Unfortunately given the complexity of some bullying incidents, speedy judgements and reactions, may make the situation worse.

Schools that respond reactively tend to use the school psychologist correspondingly for individual referrals. The school psychologists becomes trapped in the 'helper' or 'rescuer' role, which usually favours assisting the victim and protecting them from the bully.

This approach can result in the psychologist supporting the child and parents in organising some form of escape from the situation. Depending on the age group, this may result in changing classes, changing schools, home education or leaving school for work.

Psychologists who battle on, will often work in a reactive way to help the victim. They may become involved in a range of strategies to attempt to solve the problems such as victim support and anger management groups and deal with endless individual referrals. Without a whole school collaborative approach, however, this becomes a stressful and disheartening approach due to work overload and diminishing returns.

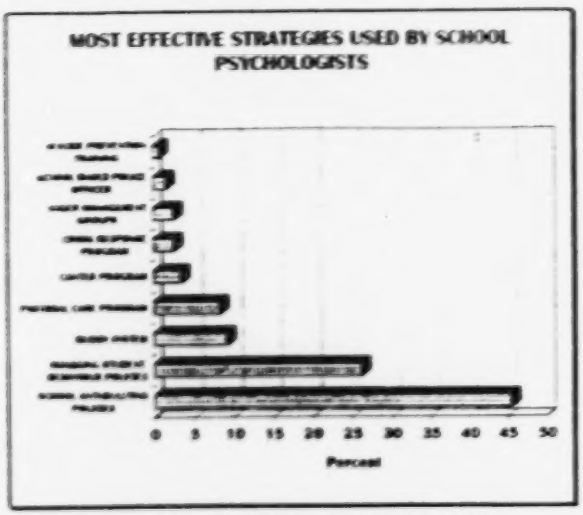

Table 3: Most effective current strategies to prevent/ respond to school violence according to school psychologists, WA 1994

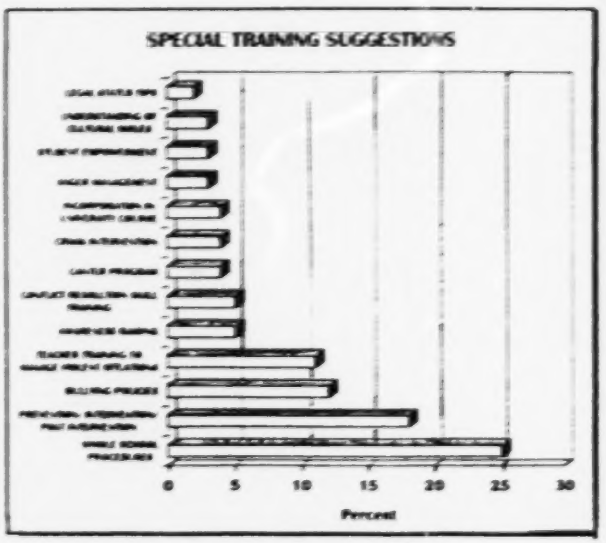

Table 4: Special training suggestions for school psychologists suggested by school psychologists to address school violence

Implications

Given the prevalence of bullying and violence in schools and its negative effects on the well-being and learning environment of students, programs need to be placed on the educational agenda and resourced in such a way that all schools can readily access expertise, resources and training.

Schools need to be made aware of the range of proactive strategies available to address school bullying/ violence and reframe it as an important educational health and safety issue, rather than rely on customary punitive and reactive measures.

School psychologists have a range of specialist skills to assist schools in this. These skills include: knowledge of organisational and pastoral care systems; assessment and counselling; research and evaluation skills; development of baseline data, and interpretation of data and research; ability to run effective groups in social skills training and committees to assist in the development of school policies and programs; ability to run workshops for staff, students and parents; knowledge of behaviour management and counselling techniques, communication and conflict resolution skills.

However, lack of access to specific training and research in the area of bullying and violence combined with poor promotion of their skills, means that the majority of school psychologists in Western Australia have not felt confident enough to take a lead in this area.

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In the United States of America the Centre for Disease Control in Atlanta has considered the prevalence youth violence to be such that it is rated as an epidemic (Furlong et al, 1994).

Towards Students

Criminal justice reports also provide information on levels of school violence. Results from the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics indicated a rise in violent assaults at schools from 282 cases in 1990 to 408 in 1992. Aggravated assaults increased the most from 50 in 1990 to 80 in 1992.

Confidential student surveys have provided information on the levels of bullying in schools. The results indicate that bullying amongst school children is also a significant problem in schools, schools differ in the amount of bullying and at least 10% of students in schools are being bullied frequently (Martin & Griffiths, 1995; Rigby & Slee, 1991 & 1993).

The school psychologists survey in Western Australia indicated that 42.7% perceived violence to be a significant problem in their schools, 35.1% perceived it as a midsized problem and 7.6% as a large or very large problem. More than half of the school psychologists (54%) reported that verbal abuse occurs often, 26.8% reported physical forms of abuse, and 3% more severe forms of violence i.e. threatened or harmed with a weapon. Refer to table 1 for the worst incidents dealt with during employment by school psychologists in Western Australia.

Towards Teachers

Data is also available that suggests that the problem of school violence is also experienced by school staff who are also reporting an increase in incidents.

A study by Precision Information Pty. Ltd. for the State School Teachers Union of Western Australia (1993), reported that 1364 cases of physical assault and 4716 cases of serious verbal abuse had been directed at teachers, and 610 cases of damage to teachers property had occurred from 1993 to 1994.

Towards School Psychologists

The survey results indicated that school psychologists perceived students and staff to experience higher levels of violence, but that school psychologists themselves were not immune to this in their workplace environment. 12.18% overall indicated that they had experienced some forms of violence. 5.2% reported that they had considered resigning as a consequence of working with school violence.

Generally Western Australian school psychologists were unconcerned about their safety at school (91.6%) and the majority worried about it less than once a year (89.6%).

Effects

The effects of bullying /violence on individual students can take many forms. It can lead to social withdrawal, long-term difficulties in forming interpersonal relationships, low self-esteem, stress and health related problems, truancy, maladaptive behaviour, lack of concentration, decline in academic achievement, depression and in the worst cases - suicide (Besag, 1989; Griffiths, 1993; Olweus, 1989; Slee & Rigby, 1993).

The perpetrators are also affected by their own actions, with evidence that they are more likely to underachieve in later life, continue to misuse power and are four times more likely to end up with a criminal record by the age of thirty (Olweus, 1993).

In schools the prevalence of bullying and violence can undermine the well-being of the school community and become a major inhibiting factor to a conducive learning environment. The effects on schools can include discipline problems; reduced teaching and learning time; increase in student suspensions; increase in staff/ student stress and resultant health problems, absences, transfers and staff resignations.

School Programs To Address Bullying and Violence

Much of the research into bullying and violence in schools has been developed by psychologists working in education. The most extensive research to date on developing effective strategies to deal with bullying has been conducted by Olweus from Bergen University over a 20 year time span in Norway and by Smith and Sharp from the Sheffield University in the United Kingdom. Centres for the prevention of violence are more common in Canada and the USA which conducts multi-discipline research in schools with major input from educational psychologists(e.g. Elliott, 1994; Furlong, 1994)

The research promotes the need for schools to develop systematic and proactive policies and practices to handle bullying and violence using a process which involves a collaborative approach between students, staff, parents, the community and other agencies. When asked if schools had violence prevention/intervention programs, 45.6% of the school psychologists in Western Australia reported that

Special training needs to be made available to school psychologists to increase their level of confidence and ability to assist schools to deal effectively with bullying and violence.

A cascade system of developing expertise across schools is needed in order to make systems manageable. The school psychologist are able to be in a key training and development role to ensure that programs become an integral part of the school curriculum.

All sections of each part of the school community need access to knowledge and skills: parents, students, staff, administrators, schools psychologists and other specialist school staff such as nurses, community police officers, welfare officers and social workers. Community agencies that deal with incidents or their aftermath also need access to the information and appropriate responses including: general practitioners, psychiatrists, counselling services, lawyers, police, and juvenile justice workers.

School psychologists are well-placed to offer a strategic role in the process of assisting schools to develop effective whole school programs to counteract violence and develop positive social skills.

This paper has explored some of the possibilities for school psychologists, and also some roadblocks and traps.

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